

4 Manifesto

Luke 4: 14 - 30

Jesus returned to his home town, Nazareth. Alive with the Spirit of God, he had been around Galilee, talking to people, teaching, speaking wherever the people met. And people were talking about him. Great excitement everywhere, everyone saying what a wonderful speaker he was, what a good man, and how thrilling the message he brought them.

When he returned to Nazareth, his reputation was already made, but it's hard to have a reputation in your own town. People know you too well, or at least they think they know you. "Local boy makes good" is always interesting news, and will get some attention, but there was perhaps a little too much of the prophet about Jesus. "Local boy makes prophet" is not so easy to swallow. People prefer their prophets to be mysterious, to come from a distant and desert place and not from the local builder's yard.

Anyway, Jesus came home to Nazareth after he had been teaching in the towns and villages around Galilee. On the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue, and there he was asked to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He found the place where God's good news is proclaimed to Israel in exile, and, as he read, he knew that the prophecy was for today, for Nazareth and for Now.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to declare release for prisoners
and sight for the blind;
to set the downtrodden free,
and to announce the Lord's year of remission¹.

(Isaiah 61: 1 - 2; Luke 4: 18 - 19)

Here is more of that political and economic revolution that people have tried to rub out of the Christmas story. It was Jesus' manifesto,² given him by God, and it is quite clearly a revolutionary manifesto. There is seldom good news for the poor which does not involve the radical overthrow of the systems of the rich and powerful, and the

¹ Literally "the acceptable year of the Lord", this referred to the year of jubilee, in which debts were to be remitted and land restored to its original owners.

² In "Jesus Messiah", referring to the gospel according to Matthew, I spoke of the "sermon on the mount" as Jesus' manifesto. In the present case, Luke himself is presenting Jesus' words as a manifesto, a declaration of God's program right at the beginning of Jesus' mission.

manifesto's "sub-clauses" make it clear that the good news of Jesus does just that. It opens the prisons, breaks oppressive government and cancels the economic controls that keep people in subjection.

Prisoners are to be released. We don't see that happening in the Bastille, at Auschwitz, or in Guantanamo without the overthrow of structures, powers and political masters. Sight for the blind mite indeed be welcomed as a non-political and universally beneficent miracle; but for 21st century populations blinded by the propaganda and lies of an arrogant, power-mongering media, the gift of sight and insight will mean a radical overhaul of our laws of ownership and control of information.

The oppressed will be set free. Easy to say, if we imagine some romantically oppressed people of the past: Spartacus and his valiant slaves, Robin Hood's Saxon peasants, Uncle Tom and his people – the poor of long ago who looked for, and sometimes found, their liberation. But if we face up to oppression in the 21st century: the poor of many African states compelled to accept the dictates of the International Monetary Fund; governments made to give up their last resources, even their water, into the power of international corporations; the indigenous people of Central and South America suppressed by wealthy elites, their every advance resisted or crushed by American economic and military power; Aborigines of Australia, robbed of their land, their social structure and even of their parents, and then denigrated because they cannot quickly slip into the culture of their oppressors; the slave-workers of Columbia, Indonesia, China, forbidden to unionise, forbidden to claim their rights, subjected to a daily oppression which is dictated, ultimately, by the clothing stores and the supermarkets of the rich world. When we face squarely the plight of the oppressed in the 21st century, we cannot fail to recognise that their liberation, their salvation as promised by Jesus, cannot but be the overthrow of the supermarkets, the trade systems, the white complacency, the elites, the military forces, the greedy corporations, the heartless financial and economic systems of the dominant North and its voracious consumers. The manifesto of Jesus is a radical challenge to the powers of the 21st century.

So how do we, the churches and the Christian people of the West, cope with it? Well, we manage. We've had centuries, and we've learnt how to dull the cutting edge of the gospel. Luke's gospel is the sharpest challenge, so we've made it the most familiar, since familiarity breeds immunity. We borrow from other scriptures and we overlay Luke's words till the sharp edges are smoothed into rounded contours more comfortable to our attention.

There is more than enough in the first four chapters of Luke's gospel to revolutionise the 21st century. There is a program and a passion which challenges the great revolutionary movements of the 20th

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century for their caution and their timidity. That is why we take care to read them thru mental filters. The strait message, as it stands, is far too dangerous.

It is revealing and helpful to look at the way Luke has put together his gospel. It was written probably some time after Matthew's and a long time after Mark's. Large parts of it³ are taken from Mark's text, which Luke used as the main frame for his gospel. (Fortunately, there were no copyright laws in his day, or Matthew, Mark and Luke would have spent the rest of their days with their lawyers in court.) Both Matthew and Luke saw Mark's original gospel as the basically true and right account of Jesus and the work of God in his life. They were happy to build upon it. So we can expect that any "extra" that Luke has added on at the beginning, or added in in later parts of the gospel, has a particular significance for him. He was making a point. He felt that something significant could be added to Mark's original, or that something there needed to be clarified, or made more explicit.

Now Mark's gospel is itself radical, especially on the theme of power.⁴ (No gospel could be otherwise, since it is the story of Jesus the Messiah.) So I see the revolutionary proclamation that is so prominent in the early chapters of Luke (especially in Miriam's song⁵ and the manifesto) as Luke "spelling out" the implications of Mark's radical story.

What Luke has added in the first few chapters of his gospel proclaims:

- § Jesus himself as the ruler in a new order of society
- § a revolutionary change to the power structures of the world,
- § forgiveness and reconciliation with God,

the powerful overthrown, the rich sent away empty, prisoners released, debts discharged and salvation in the heart of God's forgiveness. They are not two separate items, one to be prioritised against the other, but one program of God. The unjust order of society is what God has to forgive in all of us; it arises from the sins and ignorance of those he forgives.

In these chapters, the story of Jesus' coming, his birth, his entry among his people, his childhood and growing, his sharing of repentance, his discovery of God his Father, his realisation of the call of God, and his declaration at Nazareth, Luke draws on the history, prophets and writings of Israel to show the continuity of God's purpose. It is a community saved, a people, a society, redeemed. The

³ for instance, in 4: 31 – 9: 50

⁴ See "Jesus Messiah" chs 6, 17

⁵ cf "Jesus Messiah" ch. 2

salvation long promised to Israel is a radical, social, personal salvation. It is a change of heart, behavior, lifestyle and society.

So how do we cope when our favorite gospel themes are presented in such radical and challenging terms? We resist. We draw on long-established interpretations of salvation as a mainly private matter (the Protestant heresy) or limit its social dimension to the institution and powers of a Church and such social changes as the Church hierarchy promotes (the Catholic heresy).

We take the story of Jesus' birth and make it a fairy-story for children or a once-a-year indulgence in sentimentality. We remove the angel's announcement far from the politics of Israel or of our own day and we turn the great songs of salvation, even the radical song of Jesus' mother, into liturgical chants. (After all, the best way of blunting a revolutionary song is to make it your national anthem.) We ignore Luke's report of John's message (easily done, with Matthew's and Mark's vivid alternatives), and we gloss over the manifesto.

We tell ourselves that we know all about the manifesto of Jesus and that it runs something like this: (Catholic and Protestants have only minor differences over this fundamental Christian "orthodoxy")

I have come from God.

He has sent me to give the good news to everyone,

to proclaim salvation to all who believe my doctrines (Catholic)

to proclaim salvation to all who believe the doctrine of salvation (Protestant)

healing for the sick and spiritual healing for those who repent,

to set sinners free

and to declare that the day will come when the Lord will save his people.

I don't mean to mock this alternative manifesto. There are reasons enuf, centuries of reasons, why we have developed it, and there is much in it, especially the line "to set sinners free", that still echoes the gospel. But it has killed for us the fullness of the gospel, separated us from all but its more individualistic dimensions.

With this manifesto snugly in place, we can hear the gospel read to us, even Luke's manifesto, and hear only pleasant-sounding words, metaphorical reassurances whose resonance confirms for us what we already know. The manifesto bounces off us and few are stirred to revolution by the words that Jesus announced to his people at Nazareth.

I do not deny that in the flow of both Catholic and Protestant history the message of the gospel has frequently broken thru and roused honest believers into the real way of salvation. There was, for example, the Franciscan movement in mediaeval Catholicism, and

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evangelical opposition to slavery in England and America, social and religious revival thru people like Wilberforce and Charles Finney. There are movements and awakenings now, of the kind mentioned in the books of the American preacher Jim Wallis.⁶ But what I am saying is that the full truth has been resisted and the message frustrated for far too long. We have come to a point where the world cries out for salvation, where the would-be and false saviors who were so prominent in the 20th century no longer have any dreams to offer. We have come to a point, in the 21st century, where we can no longer survive with a vital strand of the gospel disguised or denied. Without it, the rest of the message is dying, dissipating into vague irrelevance or bigoted escapism. Denying the revolutionary and social dimension of the gospel and reducing the message to a private and individual one has only hidden Jesus. It has put out the lite and darkened the way of salvation.

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So Jesus delivered his manifesto, good news from the prophet Isaiah for the people of Nazareth. Good news indeed, and news they were glad to be reminded of. How often they had had it read to them in the future glorious tense, and dremt of a wonderful day when the Lord's time would come to fulfil his word. When they saw that Jesus had something to say to the text, they settled down to hear him. It would be good to dream again, and to hear of his dreams, visions of the future that Isaiah's words inspired in his lucid and expressive mind. His words would give them hope, lift their eyes to the future when Israel would no longer be a nation under pagan rulers, their lives subject to frustration, thret and uncertainty. They were redy, this plesant Sabbath morning, to live a bit in that future. What they were not redy for was the present perfected tense.

He closed up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant, sitting down to teach them. With all eyes fixed on him, for his person and manner captured their attention, he began telling them: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled before your own eyes." Not "in the days to come" or tomorrow, but today. Not "wait patiently a little longer" but "It is fulfilled today." The word of salvation, God's word, he sed, was now fulfilled, and the great hopes of liberation, the visions of the prophet Isaiah, were to be recognised now, in the present action of God among them. It was either very exciting or very, very disappointing.

They were all impressed. His words and his manner won wide approval. But approval is one thing, believing another. They were his family and his life-friends. They knew him and he was one of them: Joseph the builder's son. As his people, they had a right to expect

⁶ e.g. Seven Ways to Change the World

healings and miracles such as they had heard of in Capernaum. If he had worked wonders among strangers, how much more should he be willing to work wonders among his own proper neighbors? The physician ought to take care of his own family.

But it was just this expectation that was the trouble for Jesus. For them to think that they owned him, that the power of God and the coming of God's kingdom was theirs by right, because they knew him and he was their neighbor, was an obstacle to any real faith. Faith is only possible in a realistic relationship with God, and in reality we have no claim upon God. All our confidence has to be humility before God.

For the strangers who took him for a prophet (and it's always easier to see the prophet in a stranger - prophets are supposed to be something strange) it was possible to approach him in faith, trusting the power of God in him. For those who knew him well enough to presume, presumption killed faith. So he reminded them of the history of their great prophets, Elijah and Elisha. In Elijah's day, at the time of the great famine, the prophet was sent to help not one of his own people, but a foreigner, a Phoenician widow.⁷ And in Elisha's day there were many lepers in Israel, but none of them was cured, only the Syrian general, Naaman.⁸

They were outraged. He was not only rejecting them but speaking against Israel itself. He was disloyal, unpatriotic, blasphemous. The one thing they did not, would not consider, was that he was quoting to them the story of their own prophets, in which they professed to believe. They hauled him out of the synagogue and dragged him up to the top of a hill, where they would have thrown him over a cliff. But he slipped thru the mob and got away. I guess he had enough family and friends in the crowd to elbow and jostle him space to escape.

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The whole of Luke's introduction (up to the middle of what we count as chapter 4) is important to understanding how he understood and passes on to us the good news of Jesus. It was by sifting and choosing from the sources of information available to him⁹ that he arrived at this particular narrative, and there should be no mistaking the thrust of the commentary with which he has expanded Mark's succinct introduction.

It was not biographical; it was never meant to inform our curiosity about the infancy of Jesus. The central characters of the infancy

⁷ I Kings 17: 7 - 16

⁸ II Kings ch 5

⁹ Luke 1: 3

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narrative itself are Zechariah, Elizabeth, Miriam, the shepherds and Simeon. And yet it is all about Jesus, about God's work of salvation centered in him. It is not a cosy family story but a clear and moving statement of God's intent, by which we are to interpret the gospel that follows. From the story of Zechariah's unbelief and Miriam's utter, humble trust, from their songs and the angels' and Simeon's, from the story of Jesus lost and found in the Temple, from John's answer to the repentant functionaries, from Jesus' answer to the tempter and from the declaration of his mission at Nazareth, we have, in Luke's commentary, the revelation of God's intent.

You could say that the whole of this introductory section is a manifesto, a manifesto wisely constructed as a story, with different witnesses giving their different viewpoints, for the intention of God can never be cut down to a simple combination of words, a statement on paper. It is only by being open to the different ways it is seen and understood that we can begin to get a feel for the wholeness and the newness of God's work. What matters now is not being able to produce a formula that defines God's program, but being aware of God's work as the fulfilment of a long-standing program into which we ourselves are entered, and being able to open ourselves to the reality, to live from it.

So the angels tell us of a king and savior, a savior who comes as ruler, the promise of good and secure government from the throne of David in Jerusalem, Godself glorified in Heaven by the peace, the order and integrity that reigns on earth. His mother, Miriam, tells us of the utter faithfulness of God and God's goodness to God's people, of revolution and reversal in the sorry order of the world, the poor and the weak finally rescued from the oppression of the powerful. The priest Zechariah tells us of Israel victorious and protected from her enemies, of the promise to Abraham fulfilled in a people who may live without fear, of salvation in the forgiveness of sin and in the clear knowledge of God. His son, John, grown to manhood, calls his people to repentance, announces the imminence of God, society transformed under his judgement and a baptism to come in the very Spirit of God. Finally, the heavens are opened and no longer an angel but Godself declares: "You are my beloved Son; you have my utter approval."

From that point on it is Jesus who learns, knows and declares. He goes out into the desert to wrestle with the meaning of God's call and his role as Son of God: it is not for his own comfort, and it is not a matter of worldly or supernatural power. The intentions of God will indeed be fulfilled in him and it is he who will realise God's project, but according to the understanding and intentions of God, as God declares it. When he comes to Nazareth, having begun to speak and to act in various places in Galilee, he knows what his mission is:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to declare release for prisoners
and sight for the blind;
to set the downtrodden free,
and to announce the Lord's year of remission.

Jesus' mission is the ending of poverty and oppression; it is healing and freedom. He will fulfil both the words and the deeds of the prophets, for a whole history of promise is about to be completed. The light of salvation will shine for Israel and for all the nations, and none of them, not even Israel, can take it for granted, for it challenges them all. It is rescue from their enemies, and a change of heart within themselves. It is forgiveness in the compassion of God. And it is happening now. The promise is peace on earth thru friendship with God, but it will not come about in a gush of warm feelings. Its entry is in radical, revolutionary change: the uplifting of the poor, the downfall of the powerful, the grasping hands of the rich left empty while the hungry are filled with good things.

God's program of salvation is a fundamental change to the way the world is and a radical change in the human heart. They are not two programs but one integral whole. Neither really happens without the other. The human heart is saved, finally delivered from its sins and fears, in the saving of human society; and human society is truly saved with the changing and healing of human hearts.